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Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?

The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines fiction as “something invented by the imagination or feigned; *specifically*: an invented story.” The anthology, *Perrine’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense,* defines the two broad classifications in literature of commercial fiction and literary fiction. The primary purpose for commercial fiction is to entertain and keep the “deep thought” process at a minimum, and in contrast, literary fiction aims to provide complex, lifelong artistic and intellectual gratification. Many literary elements of fiction reveal themselves in Joyce Carol Oates’ short story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been”. For further analysis, the key factors that influence the literariness of Oates’ short story include plot/structure, characterization, and symbols/allegories.

In a well-developed piece of literary fiction, there usually exists a variation of conflict. A conflict is a clash of actions, ideas, desires, or wills, and short stories characters represent a conflict through person vs. person, person vs. nature, and person vs. self. In Oates’ story, Connie, the protagonist, deals with two of these three types of conflict. Her immaturity is shown when she “wore a pull-over jersey blouse that looked one way when she was at home and another way when she was away from home” (Oates 312-313). In the beginning of the story, Connie reveals herself as immature and vain, and she confines herself to her own little world. Connie’s mother is constantly telling Connie to “’[s]top gawking at yourself, who are you? You think you’re so pretty?’” (Oates 312). The mother's analysis of Connie's vainness demonstrates the conflict of person vs. self. Connie’s focus is on her own appearance, and it soon becomes too late to realize what her past actions will become in the future. Towards the middle of the story following right up to the end, Arnold Friend shows up on Connie’s doorstep and claims, “’I’m your lover. You don’t know what that is but you will’” and ”’I’ll come inside you where it’s all secret and you’ll give in to me and you’ll love me—‘“ (Oates 321). Here, the confident Connie seals her own destiny through her initial attempt to attract Arnold Friend, consequently, allowing Friend to take complete control of her.

Connie has no choice but to walk away with Arnold Friend at the end of the story, and the development of suspense is an important factor that keeps readers asking questions like “Why is the protagonist acting like this” and “How is the protagonist’s behavior to be explained in terms of human personality and character?” Connie’s rude behavior towards her mother, her two styles of dressing, one way at home and another when she is out with her friends, her obsession and passion about boys, her enjoyment of dreaming and music, and her naïve, overconfident attitude towards Arnold Friend forces us to ponder the truth behind Connie’s ridiculous behavior. The ending reveals the true meaning behind her adolescent behavior. Friend tells Connie “come out through the kitchen to me honey and let’s see a smile, try it, you’re a brave sweet little girl” (Oates 326). This scene, with Connie’s previous behavior, in combination with her feeling that “for the first time in her life that it was nothing that was hers, that belonged to her” (Oates 325) demonstrates the practical, real-life examples of these types of situations. Connie’s behavior is representative of young girls who fall prey to the sexual dominance of males.

With the lack of direct description of Connie and her role as the fifteen year old girl in *“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been,”* it is easier to understand who Connie is as a character through her interactions with her family members, girl friends, and boys. This process of introduction of Connie is representative of indirect presentation. Indirect presentation is the process of the author revealing the character through their actions; what the character says or does determines his or her identity. Connie reveals her major characteristics through instances such as where she “would raise her eye-brows at these familiar complaints and look right through her mother, into a shadowy vision of herself as she was right at that moment” (Oates 312). Connie clearly does not like to deal with her mother, and she is inconsiderate of her mother’s true emotions and feelings. Another example is when Connie informs her parents she is going to a movie with her friend, when in actuality, “she spent three hours with [a boy], at [a] restaurant where they ate hamburgers and drank Cokes in wax cups that were always sweating” (Oates 314). This signifies her deception techniques that she frequently uses on her parents. As the short story goes on, we are able to determine Connie’s true character through her language, actions, and conscious thoughts.

Connie’s language, actions, and conscious thoughts lead to the development of a round character. Round characters are very complex and many sided; they have the three-dimensional quality of real people. In “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been,” indirect characterization allows for a deeper analysis of Connie’s actions, conscious, and subconscious, which brings to life the three-dimensional aspects of round characters. Connie is a plausible character and is believable because she is fully developed, very similar to the actions and behaviors of a typical fifteen-year-old girl. Lying to her parents, sneaking around with boys, always having a messy room, constantly fussing over looks, and too vain to comprehend fully the true dangers that lurk within this world are most of the aspects of Connie’s character that correspond to indirect characterization and the round character.

With the development of plot and structure, including all of the aspects of characterization, someone might ask, “What does all of this mean?” Any literary fiction “will generally be an inch long and a mile deep.” Mr. Lane explains his phrase as literary works of art and novels may be short, but the depths of analyzing that are possible with these short stories is endless. One literary element, called an allegory, is an essential aid in determining what this short story is attempting to reveal about life. An allegory, unlike a symbol, is a story that has a second meaning, beneath the surface, endowing a cluster of characters, objects, or events with added significance. Often the pattern relates each literal item to a corresponding abstract idea or moral principle. Even though fiction is generally full of symbolism and/or has allegorical elements, *“*Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*”* is a short story in which two allegories are present, depending on how we view the elements of literary fiction that are present. Although there are other possible allegories that we can extract from this short story, the realistic allegory and the feministic allegory present themselves as predominant.

Connie, at the age of fifteen, is going through a lot in her life, trying to mature too fast before she is ready. With her deception, boy crazy nights, afternoon dreams, two-sided personality, constant desire to mature, and then finally getting that opportunity with Arnold Friend, Connie’s lifestyle directly connects with many young teenagers of today’s world. Many teens are looking for something; they just do not know exactly what that something is. The teenager inevitably faces the ruthless realities of the outside, unsheltered world. As people grow up, they become increasingly aware of the violence and abuse that is present all the time. Connie experiences this for the first time through her encounter with Arnold Friend.

Throughout the entire scene with Arnold Friend, Connie is slowly losing self-confidence as Friend easily lures her under his command. As Arnold Friend pulls up to Connie’s house, Connie tells him, “’Who the hell do you think you are?’” (Oates 316). Arnold Friend says things like, “’Just for a ride, Connie sweetheart’” and “’I took a special interest in you, such a pretty girl, and found out all about you’” (Oates 318). Gradually, Arnold Friend is eating away at Connie, and he continues to do this until Connie breaks down. Friend is finally getting to Connie when she rushes to the phone, but only “something roared in her hear, a tiny roaring, and she was so sick with fear that she could do nothing but listen to it—“ (Oates 324). By this time, Arnold Friend psychologically controlled Connie. Shortly after, Connie “thought, I’m not going to see my mother again. She thought, I’m not going to sleep in my bed again. Her bright green blouse was all wet” (Oates 325). Leaving with Arnold Friend was the only option Connie saw left, and at this point, she accepts her doomed fate. The feministic allegory that exists is that of a sexually attractive and youthful girl enslaved in a male dominated sexual relationship. When Connie comes to the realization that her life will never be the same and walks outside into Friends arms, she is surrendering her independence of Arnold Friend, a threatening male.

The elements of fiction are different for commercial fiction and literary fiction. “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*”* is a short story that has elements of both commercial and literary fiction, but is primarily literary fiction. Another way to look at literary fiction is at an iceberg. Above the water, a relatively small chunk of ice appears to be floating on the water’s surface, and below the water, the ice is twenty to thirty percent longer with 7/8 of the entire mass under water. The ice on top are the words on the pages that readers read, while the ice underneath are the depths to which we can analyze the underlying truth that is within the story. The specific use of plot/structure, characterization, and symbols/allegories are essential for the development of either commercial or literary stories that contain the proper elements of fiction.

Works Cited

Oates, Joyce C. “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Perrine’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense. Eds. Thomas R. Arp, Greg Johnson. Boston Massachusetts, USA: Thomson/Wadsworth Publishing, 2005. 311-326.